

# briefly STATED

Research Summary

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## Women Religious in a Changing Urban Landscape: The Work of Catholic Sisters in Metropolitan Cleveland

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*Women religious play a vital role in many communities in addressing the needs of the poor, neglected, and vulnerable members of society. In the history of northeast Ohio, Catholic nuns have been instrumental in the arenas of education, healthcare, outreach and advocacy. In high poverty cities such as Cleveland, women religious continue to provide essential services, supports, and spiritual guidance in many venues. The experience in Cleveland is relevant to cities with an urban core where the population has shifted to suburban areas, leaving inner-city churches with declining membership and support. In addition, this case example will show how proactive and collaborative efforts on the part of women religious can enhance the likelihood of effectively addressing community needs presently and in the future.*

### RESEARCH PURPOSE

Between 2006 and 2010, the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland has engaged in a process to adapt the number and distribution of parishes to changing demographics in the 8-county region. This will ultimately result in a reduction of parishes by approximately one-quarter, many in the inner city, by June 2010. In urban neighborhoods where the churches are anchor institutions and providers of critical services, the loss of these entities could lead to a potentially serious gap in services to maintain the well-being of residents.

In anticipation of the impact of this wave of parish closures and consolidations, many women religious began to consider how they should respond to the needs of the communities affected by these changes. While they generally knew many Sisters working in the areas most affected, data was needed to get a collective sense of where Sisters currently work, which ministries might be at risk, and where they should focus their attention.

As part of this work two data collection strategies were undertaken: (1) an inventory of the assignments and ministries of women religious was completed to assess the geographic dispersion of sisters, and (2) a survey was conducted of approximately 300 women religious in active ministry in the Cleveland region about the nature of their work and the impact of the forthcoming parish closures. This work is relevant to women religious and others looking for effective responses to shifting community realities.

The major objectives of the research were to (a) develop a baseline assessment of the work of women religious in a changing environment, (b) solicit views from women religious themselves about their challenges, needs, and vision, (c) assess the strengths and opportunities for collaboration, (d) inform the strategies of the Sisters of Charity Foundation's work to sustain needed ministries, and (e) compile data that illuminates the unique approach and spirit of women religious.



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## RESEARCH CONTEXT

The focus of the study in the Cleveland, Ohio area brings with it the economic and social realities of a region that has experienced decades of population loss and economic decline. In the latter half of the 20th century, the concentration of poverty in Cleveland grew and spread out from the center city. As the population migrated to the inner and outer-ring suburbs, an increasing share of poor families was left in the center city. In recent years poverty has also increased in inner ring suburbs. Driven by population and fiscal realities, in 2006 the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland convened a process of parish clustering among its 224 parishes, in which groups of parishes would collaboratively develop recommendations to the Diocese. The Diocese announced a plan in March 2009 whereby 29 parishes would close and 41 parishes would be involved in 18 mergers. By June 30, 2010, the end result of this would be 52 fewer parishes operating in the Diocese.

**TABLE 1** Sisters From Many Religious Orders

ORDER OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS	SURVEY POPULATION	TOTAL RESPONSES
Ursuline Sisters (OSU)	88	49
Sisters of Notre Dame (SND)	71	44
Congregation of Saint Joseph (CSJ)	25	14
Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis (SSJ-TOSF)	24	12
Sisters of the Humility of Mary (HM)	15	10
Sisters of the Most Holy Trinity (OSST)	12	3
Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati (SC)	12	10
Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament (SIW)	11	6
Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine (CSA)	10	5
Sisters of the Holy Spirit (CSSp)	7	5
Orders with smaller numbers of Sisters serving in the county*	13	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>164</b>

## METHODOLOGY

This study develops an inventory, and conducts a survey, of Sisters in ministry in Cuyahoga County. The survey combined a series of closed-ended and open-ended items and was adapted in part from a survey used in a key study conducted in South Carolina (Small, 2008). Given the multitude of Orders active in the Cleveland region, a crucial step was in seeking and receiving an endorsement of the study from Conference of Religious Leadership (CORL), a collaborative organization with representatives of the leadership of the majority of Orders.

In order to assess the impact of church closings and mergers, the Sisters sought for participation in the survey were those currently in ministry out in the community in Cuyahoga County. Using congregational listings and public records, a listing of Sisters was compiled along with their ministry site. The listings were reviewed for accuracy by congregational leadership from each Order. Surveys were distributed to approximately 288 Sisters with a stamped return envelope in early September 2009. In total, 164 usable surveys were returned (57%).

## FINDINGS

Women from 15 religious Orders participated in the survey. Over one-half of the respondents were either Ursuline Sisters or Sisters of Notre Dame, reflecting the prevalence of these Sisters in the population surveyed. See *Table 1*. Among respondents, the median age was 64 years of age, and 16% were 75 or older; the median age for all Sisters in the Diocese is 72.5, so this somewhat younger group of respondents reflects their engagement in active ministry. Nearly one-half of respondents (46%) began their career in ministry in northeast Ohio in the decade 1964-74 and overall, the median years of experience in current ministry was nearly two decades. Over 80% of respondents hold a graduate degree of some type, reflecting a highly educated group of professional women. Several themes are now discussed.

**Presence in the community.** Nearly 60% of respondents reside in the same geographic area where their primary ministry is located, and 88% of these Sisters believe that their physical presence in the geographic area is either extremely important or very important to their effectiveness in ministry. *Figure 1* shows the geographic spread of Sisters across the county. In general, Sisters' ministries are concentrated in areas of higher poverty, particularly within the City of Cleveland. In addition, there are many neighbor-

## Distribution of Women Religious and Selected Parish Locations in Cuyahoga County

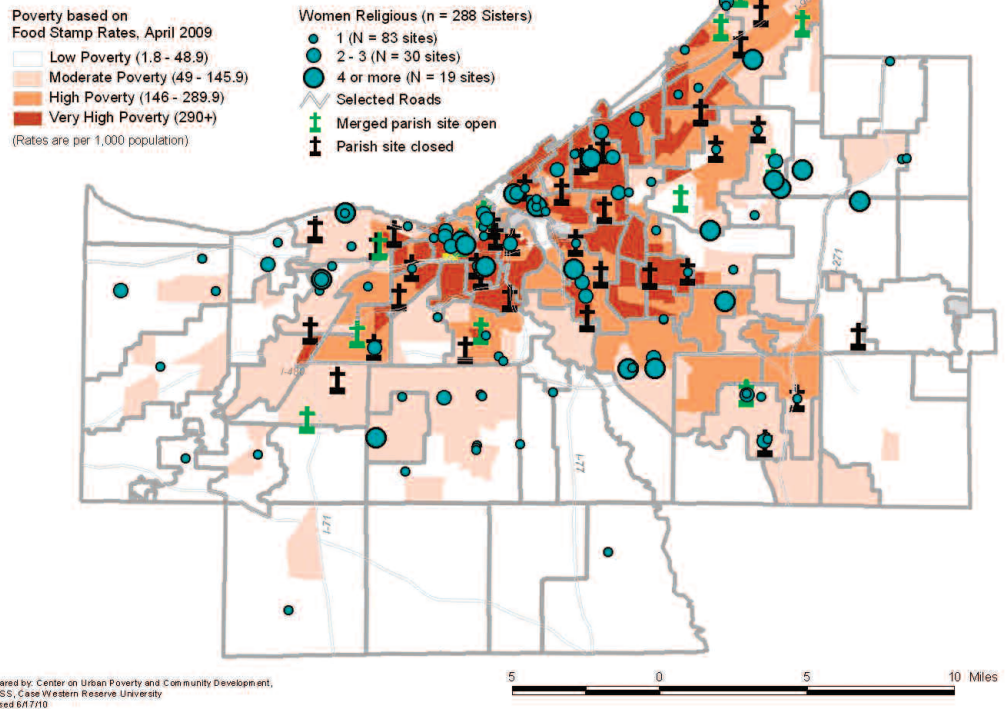


FIGURE 1 Women Religious in Cuyahoga County

hoods that have several different ministries operating in close proximity to one another.

**Diversity of ministries.** The ministries reported by respondents reflect the diversity of the work Sisters do and the charism that they and their Order bring to ministry. When asked about their primary ministry, nearly half (42%) identified an educational setting and role. Religious education in the parish setting represents an additional 16% of the Sisters responding.

**Involvement in multiple ministries.** 99% of Sisters reported being involved in more than one ministry. More than one-half reported involvement in two ministries, one-quarter reported three ministries, and 13% reported four ministries. Sisters report working an average of 41 hours per week but range from 7-80 hours of work weekly; 21% work less than 30 hours per week, 43% work 30-40 hours per week and over one-third (37%) work more than 40 hours per week.

**Site of ministries.** Sisters report that their ministries are housed at a diverse set of community sites, including parishes, churches, or schools (44%), sites operated by their Order (17%), independent 501(c)(3) agency sites (12%), hospital or healthcare facilities (10%), college campuses

(7%), Diocesan offices (4%), or other sites (6%).

**Ministry size.** The ministries also vary substantially in regard to the numbers of persons served annually—19% serve less than 100, 44% serve 100 to 499, 12% serve 500 to 999, and 25% serve 1,000 or more. Nearly one-half the Sisters reported that in the preceding 12 months their program had experienced an expansion (46%) and a similar number reported that the programs were about the same size (44%). Only five percent reported that their program had been reduced.

**Funding of ministries.** Sisters' ministries receive their funding from a great variety of sources. Financial data was provided by 59% of respondents (97). One-half of Sisters are in a ministry that receives 90% or more of its funding from a single source, and 88% are in a ministry that receives half or more of its funding from a single source. The Diocese or host parish/school and the Sisters' Order are the two most frequent sources of funding identified.

**People served by these ministries.** As to the characteristics of their targeted service population, regardless of the population sought by a particular ministry effort, the population served routinely shows a greater degree of needs than

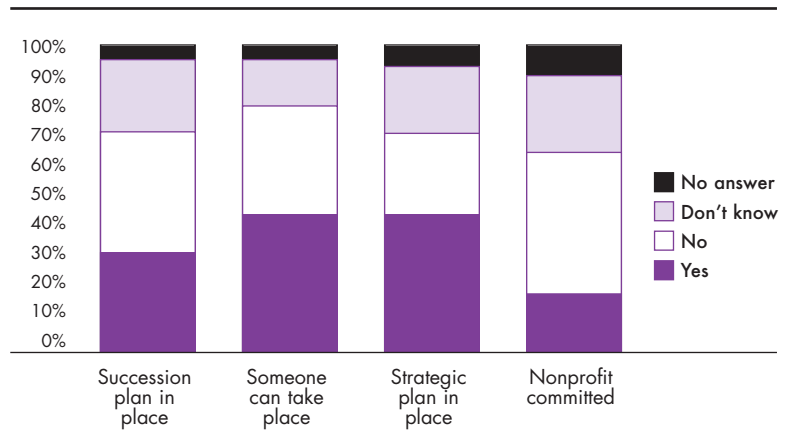
anticipated. For example, though just over one-quarter of Sisters reported that low-income families were their primary target population, 44% reported that low-income families are served by their ministry. The beneficiaries of Sisters' ministries live across the county, but among the top 15 identified Zip Codes served by ministries, nine are located in the City of Cleveland. These ministries serve people from many faith traditions—47% serve mostly Catholics, 38% serve mostly non-Catholics, 2% serve those with no faith tradition, 6% did not know, and 7% did not respond.

**Use of collaboration.** The survey asked Sisters about their ministry's collaboration with other entities and 72% reported being engaged in collaboration of some kind. Collaboration has a range of meanings but fundamentally reflects the act of working together. Nearly one-half of Sisters' ministries were engaged with Sisters from other Orders (45%) and with Diocesan organizations (48%). To some extent, ministries were collaborating with nonprofit or governmental organizations (41%) and faith-based organizations (34%). Among Sisters who reported collaboration, over two-thirds reported collaboration across two or more domains. This might reflect the multiple ministries, many in a volunteer capacity, which Sisters are engaged in beyond their primary ministry. Sisters see many benefits to collaboration and most frequently cite increased ability to serve clients better, to participate in advocacy, awareness, and education, and to develop and operate joint programming, as benefits. A third or fewer Sisters reported seeing benefits from collaboration in the areas of leveraging resources, recruiting volunteers, accessing complementary skills/knowledge, peer learning, and obtaining in-kind donations.

**Long-term Ministry Planning.** Sisters were asked about the plans for sustaining their primary ministry and their own personal ministry plans. While less than one-third reported having a succession plan in place, nearly one-half reported that there was someone to take the Sister's place should she be absent from ministry. See Figure 2. In addition, nearly one-half reported having a strategic plan for the ministry. Approximately 20% reported having a nonprofit in the community committed to sustaining the ministry, though many of these were specific funders that were willing to fund the activities.

**Individual concerns and plans for the future.** When asked if they were worried about future of their primary ministry more than one-

**FIGURE 2** Ministries with Succession/Strategic Plans



third responded "not at all" (38%), one-half "somewhat worried" (46%), 13% were "very worried," and 3% did not answer. Sisters who reported not being worried were disproportionately in ministries located at sites operated by religious Orders or healthcare facilities. Conversely, Sisters who were most worried were located at parish, church, or school sites.

In regard to their own ministry plans, one-third of Sisters reported that they planned to continue for up to three years in their current ministry, 25% reported planning to continue for 4-6 years, and 37% were planning to continue for 7 years or longer. One Sister's sentiment reflected that of many: "as long as able, healthy, God permits." If the Sister was to leave her current ministry, nearly one-half (46%) would seek another ministry in the region, 18% would not, and 34% were unsure.

## ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sisters who participated in the survey effort provided detailed information about their ministries and experiences. Sisters were also asked to provide comments and reflections which yield a number of observations about the current environment for these ministries.

**Ministries need resources.** A clear tension is evident due to balancing the desire to serve those in need with the financial needs of the ministry (and the Order), given that the income of Sisters supports the overall needs of the Order. The primary identified needs relate to financial stability, as well as the tension and time associated with the process of seeking/securing funding. As stated in the findings, less than 40% had sought new funding, though the majority of those that did, received it.

### **Managing within a shifting environment.**

Looking to the future, respondents indicated a continuing commitment to their neighborhood or community unity, service, and social justice; however, almost an equal number of respondents indicate that they envision substantive changes in their particular ministry arenas (i.e., liturgical, pastoral, parish, or vocational ministries). The shifting environment is the second greatest concern of respondents, second only to funding. Naturally, those with concerns for their ministries (close to 59%) are more commonly in parish and school sites where the greatest changes are expected due to the parish configuration within the Diocese.

At the same time, 64% of respondents were between 60-74 years old and many respondents have been active in ministry for over 40 years. Long-term planning for the stability of current ministries related to staff transitions is appropriate. This is particularly challenging in the context of declining vocations to religious life, where lay individuals may need to transition into a role formerly held by a Sister. The comments suggest, though, that Sisters are still very future-oriented as suggested in one Sister's reminder that "the harvest will be great, though the laborers are few."

**Collaboration as a vehicle to enhance ministries.** Over 118 survey respondents (72%) indicated that their primary ministry engaged in joint programming or some other type of collaboration. Collaboration was noted to be a valuable resource for ministry, with 100 respondents indicating that it leads to better services.

**Support for specific groups or ministry types.** Throughout the survey, several groupings of primary ministries surfaced as perhaps warranting special attention. These ministries are highlighted either due to their predominance (such as education) or because of an elevated level of need: seniors (especially the home-bound), young adults, individuals who have lost faith during the process of reconfiguration, families with school-age kids, and immigrants.

Education, both inside and outside the classroom, emerged as an important substantive domain: specifically, at least 69 respondents indicated a primary ministry in K-12, post secondary, or out-of-school-time fields. Additionally, 7 respondents indicated that they primarily work with daycare, early childhood or early intervention initiatives. Also, when selecting ministry target groups, the categories of families, infants/toddlers/preschoolers, youth K-8, youth 9-12, and youth college age were

selected 193 times. Many of these are also in areas hit hardest by the Diocesan reconfiguration.

### **The challenge of the smaller ministry.**

Small ministries, with 19 or fewer full-time employees, accounted for almost 63% of respondents (83 of 132 individuals responding). Furthermore, 38% of respondents with knowledge of budgets/operating costs indicated that their primary ministry's budget was under \$250,000—interestingly, this is almost an equal number of respondents to those indicating an annual budget of \$1 million or more. These ministries are more likely to need capacity in many areas, such as succession and strategic planning and fund development.

However, they also enable Sisters to work with the clients in a special way: holistically, present, and with time for listening and reflection.

**The needs by geography.** Ministries are heavily targeted to poor neighborhoods and 9 of the top 15 client Zip Codes served by ministries were located in the City of Cleveland, where poverty rates are highest and most concentrated.

**Faith is core to ministry.** Ninety percent of Sisters believe that faith plays a significant role in the effectiveness of their work. The few who did not generally cited legal restrictions on the expression of faith in their work as the reason. The comments reveal different ways in which faith plays a role in the effectiveness of their programming. For most, their life choice to serve as a religious woman makes self-evident the role of faith in their work. One Sister commented "For most of my clients, God is with them by the mere fact that 'Sister' is there." Other Sisters distinguish between their personal ministry and the program ministry in which they have a role. In this case, though faith may be at the core of all they do, Sisters see a less overt role of faith in some service settings.



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Research summaries from  
the Center on Urban Poverty  
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The Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development seeks to address the problems of persistent and concentrated urban poverty and is dedicated to understanding how social and economic changes affect low-income communities and their residents. Based in Cleveland at Case Western Reserve University's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences, the Center views the city as both a laboratory for building communities and producing change locally, and as a representative urban center from which nationally relevant research and policy implications can be drawn.

A community resource for expertise and data analysis for nearly 20 years, the Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development created the groundbreaking community data system NEO CANDO (Northeast Ohio Community and Neighborhood Data for Organizing), a web-based tool that centralizes a broad array of indicators, making it easier to overlay and analyze disparate data. Community development corporations, foundation program officers, local governments, neighborhood activists and residents, students at the Mandel School and other institutions, the media, community reinvestment professionals and academic researchers are among those who have found NEO CANDO invaluable in their work. The Center conducts extensive training and maintains a listserv so NEO CANDO users can get the most out of its vast data collection. You can visit the NEO CANDO webpage at <http://neocando.case.edu>.

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